

Message Text

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SUBJ: TASMANIAN BY-ELECTION: SITUATION AND PROSPECTS

1. SUMMARY: RESIGNATION FROM PARLIAMENT JUNE 2 BY MINISTER FOR DEFENSE BARNARD HAS LED TO BY-ELECTION SCHEDULED FOR JUNE 28 TO FILL HIS VACANT SEAT. MOST COMMENTATORS BELIEVE LABOR WILL LOSE SEAT, CUTTING GOVERNMENT'S MAJORITY BUT NOT IMMEDIATELY ENDANGERING ITS CONTROL OF HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES. MORE SIGNIFICANT RESULT OF ANTICIPATED OPPOSITION VICTORY IN TASMANIAN BY-ELECTION WILL BE GROWTH OF PRESSURE WITHIN OPPOSITION RANKS TO FORCE NATIONAL ELECTIONS, POSSIBLY IN DECEMBER. IN CURRENT PUBLIC OPINION POLLS LABOR IS TRAILING OPPOSITION BY SUBSTANTIAL MARGIN. END SUMMARY.

2. RESIGNATION FROM PARLIAMENT ON JUNE 2 OF LANCE BARNARD, FORMER MINISTER FOR DEFENSE, HAS LED TO BY-ELECTION FOR HIS SEAT OF BASS (LAUNCESTON AREA OF NORTHERN TASMANIA). IN ACCORDANCE WITH CONSTITUTION SPEAKER OF HOUSE ISSUED WRIT OF ELECTION ON JUNE 3, FIXING ELECTION DAY FOR JUNE 28.

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3. MOST COMMENTATORS SUGGEST THAT LABOR WILL PROBABLY LOSE THIS

SEAT, WHICH ALP HAS HELD FOR PAST 34 YEARS. BARNARD WON SEAT IN MAY, 1974, WITH 54 PERCENT OF VOTE, DOWN SUBSTANTIALLY OVER PREVIOUS MARGINS. MOREOVER, PORTION OF THIS VOTE WAS UNDOUBTEDLY PERSONAL SUPPORT FOR BARNARD AS RESPECTED AND POPULAR LOCAL FIGURE AND WILL BE UNAVAILABLE FOR HIS SUCCESSOR AS LABOR CANDIDATE. ALP TASMANIA BRANCH WILL HOLD SPECIAL PARTY CONFERENCE JUNE 8 TO SELECT CANDIDATE. ALP IN TASMANIA IS IN POOR CONDITION AT PRESENT, WITH CONSIDERABLE FACTIONALISM AND INFIGHTING GOING ON WITHIN STATE. LABOR CONTROLS STATE PARLIAMENT BY COMFORTABLE MARGIN, BUT PREMIER W.A. NEILSON ONLY TOOK OVER FROM VETERAN LABOR PREMIER ERIC REECE MAR 31. PRESS REPORTS THAT PREMIER NEILSON CALLED PRIME MINISTER WHITLAM JUN 1 TO URGE THAT BARNARD BE DISSUADED FROM RESIGNING AND MAKING BY-ELECTION INEVITABLE, AS TASMANIAN ALP IN POOR CONDITION FOR CAMPAIGN. IN BROADER TERMS, LAST NATIONWIDE MORGAN GALLUP POLL SHOWED LIBERAL-COUNTRY PARTIES, AS OF MID-MAY, HAD 53 PERCENT OF VOTE, HAVING PICKED UP 7 PERCENT SINCE ELECTIONS OF MAY, 1974. GALLUP DOES NOT ISSUE POLL BREAKDOWNS BY STATE. AUSTRALIAN BY-ELECTIONS NORMALLY SHOW ADVERSE SWING AGAINST GOVERNMENT IN POWER.

4. UNDERLINING ABOVE CONSIDERATIONS WERE COMMENTS MADE DURING PAST WEEK BY SENIOR LABOR PARTY OFFICIALS ON RESIGNATION OF BARNARD. WHEN RESIGNATION RUMORS BEGAN TO CIRCULATE LAST WEEK, ALP FEDERAL SECRETARY COMBE COMMENTED THAT THEY WERE QTE UNBELIEVABLE END QTE CLEARLY IMPLYING A VIEW THAT LABOR WOULD LOSE THE SEAT IF BY-ELECTION HELD. ALP FEDERAL PRESIDENT R.J. HAWKE COMMENTED JUNE 3 FROM GENEVA THAT LABOR WOULD BE QTE INSANE END QTE TO FORCE BY-ELECTION BY ALLOWING BARNARD TO RESIGN. HAWKE CONTINUED, QTE IF THE PRIME MINISTER IS GOING TO ACCEPT MR. BARNARD'S RESIGNATION AND CAUSE AN ELECTION, IT WOULD BE SENSIBLE TO TALK TO THE PARTY MACHINE THAT HAS TO CONDUCT IT. THIS HAS NOT HAPPENED. THERE HAS BEEN NO CONSULTATION. IT IS AN ACT OF GALSTONIAN STUPIDITY. END QTE HAWKE'S USE OF WORD QTE GALSTONIAN END QTE IS REFERENCE TO LABOR GOVERNMENT'S ANNOUNCEMENT IN SEPT, 1973, JUST PRIOR TY BY-ELECTION IN WESTERN SUBURBAN SYDNEY SEAT OF PARAMATTA, THAT SECOND SYDNEY AIRPORT WOULD BE BUILT AT NEARBY SUBURB OF GALSTON. MOST OBSERVERS CREDITED ANNOUNCEMENT OF GALSTON AIRPORT PLAN WITH LOSS OF SEAT BY LABOR IN BY-ELECTION.

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5. OPPOSITION FIGURES, BY CONTRAST, ARE SUITABLY PLEASED AT DEVELOPMENT. OPPOSITION LEADER FRASER ISSUED PRESS STATEMENT JUNE 3 EXPRESSING CONFIDENCE THAT LIBERALS WOULD WIN. FRASER'S PRIVATE SECRETARY, PETER CROSS, CONFIRMED TO EMBOFF JUNE 4 RADIO REPORT THAT FRASER HAD POSTPONED TRIP ABROAD IN ORDER TO CAMPAIGN IN TASMANIA. FRASER INDICATED HE WOULD CAMPAIGN ON ECONOMIC ISSUES, PROBABLY A WISE CHOICE FOR ECONOMICALLY STAGNANT TASMANIA.

6. AS OF PRESENT READING LIBERAL CANDIDATE IN TASMANIAN BY-ELECTION IS RECENTLY RETIRED ARMY LTC KEVIN NEWMAN, WHO IS EXPECTED TO CONDUCT VIGOROUS CAMPAIGN. NATIONAL COUNTRY PARTY WILL RUN CANDIDATE IN BY-ELECTION, REFLECTING DECISION MADE EARLIER THIS YEAR TO RESUME ELECTORAL ACTIVITY IN TASMANIA AFTER BREAK OF MANY YEARS. NCP CANDIDATE WILL BE WILLIAM CASAMATY, GRAZIER IN LAUNCESTON AREA. LIBERAL CANDIDATE EXPECTED TO GET BULK OF OPPOSITION VOTES, WITH CASAMATY VOTES GOING TO LIBERAL UNDER PREFERENTIAL VOTE SYSTEM. IT HAD ORIGINALLY BEEN ANTICIPATED THAT BARNARD'S NEPHEW, MICHAEL BARNARD, WOULD BE CANDIDATE TO SUCCEED HIM. HOWEVER, MOST PROMINENT LABOR CANDIDATES CURRENTLY BEING MENTIONED ARE MRS.P.W. JAMES, ASSISTANT PRIVATE SECRETARY TO LANCE BARNARD, WHO HAD WORKED IN HIS LAUNCESTON OFFICE FOR PAST 13 YEARS, AND MR. J.T.C. BRASSIL, BARNARD'S PRINCIPAL PRIVATE SECRETARY IN HIS CANBERRA OFFICE. AS NOTED ABOVE, LABOR CANDIDATE WILL BE SELECTED JUNE 8.

7. COMMENT: ON ASSUMPTION THAT LIBERALS WILL WIN TASMANIAN BY-ELECTION, LABOR GOVERNMENT WILL NEVERTHELESS REMAIN IN POWER, THOUGH WITH MAJORITY REDUCED TO THREE INSTEAD OF PRESENT FIVE SEATS. EFFECTIVE MAJORITY WILL BE TWO, SINCE SPEAKER OF HOUSE IS LABOR MEMBER WHO ONLY VOTES IN EVENT OF A TIE. THIS IS TIGHT BUT MANAGEABLE MARGIN, GIVEN TIGHT AUSTRALIAN PARTY DISCIPLINE.

8. HOWEVER, REAL SIGNIFICANCE OF LIBERAL VICTORY WILL BE IMPULSE IT WILL GIVE TO OPPOSITION TO PRESS FOR NATIONAL ELECTIONS LATER THIS YEAR. OPPORTUNITY WILL COME UP IN NOVEMBER FOR OPPOSITION TO REJECT APPROPRIATIONS BILLS IN SENATE, WHERE THEY HAVE SMALL MAJORITY, AS TACTIC TO FORCE ELECTIONS. OPPOSITION COULD UNDERTAKE TO PASS BILLS ONCE GOVERNMENT ANNOUNCES ELECTIONS WILL BE HELD, PERHAPS IN EARLY DECEMBER. SHADOW MINISTER FOR IMMIGRATION, MICHAEL MACKELLAR, COMMENTED TO EMBOFF JUNE 3 THAT LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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PRESSURES TO FORCE ELECTIONS IN DECEMBER WILL MOUNT STEADILY IN WAKE OF ANTICIPATED LIBERAL VICTORY IN TASMANIAN BY-ELECTION. THIS PROSPECT WILL UNDOUBTEDLY ADD TO DILEMMA FACING WHITLAM ON BUDGET TO BE PRESENTED IN AUGUST: WHETHER TO PRUNE BUDGET DRASTICALLY, AS ANTI-INFLATIONARY LOGIC WOULD HAVE IT, OR TO HAND OUT EXPENSIVE CONCESSIONS TO INTEREST GROUPS IN ANTICIPATION OF NATIONAL ELECTIONS, FURTHER FUELLING INFLATION. GREEN

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